

CHUTZPA NEEDED TO SAY “JESUS CHRIST”

“Jesus Christ!” You hear it all the time, sometimes even religiously. But a good guess is that 98% of the time most people haven’t a clue about what the phrase really means.

Except for the fact that “Jesus Christ” is revered in church circles, it could just as well be a name like any other name. Jon Doe, Mary Smith, Abraham Lincoln, Jesus Christ, Martha Washington—one name is as good as another, and all are equally useful.

But don’t bet next week’s pay on that. It took a lot of chutzpa for the earliest followers of that rabbi to call him “Jesus Christ.”

For starters you need to realize that “Christ” isn’t a name. It’s a title. Consider President Truman. “Truman” was his name; “President” was his title. Or consider British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. “Thatcher” was her name; “Prime Minister” was her somewhat anachronistic title.

Ditto with the subject of this short essay. “Jesus” is his name; “Christ” is his title.

Now for a short lesson in biblical Hebrew and Greek. “Christ” is the word in the Christian scriptures which corresponds to the word “Messiah” in the Jewish scriptures. About the best English translation of these two foreign-language titles is “Anointed.”

In other words, “the Christ,” “the Messiah,” and “the Anointed one” all mean about the same thing. They referred to the men who were appointed as kings of God’s people and who were inducted into office by having their heads ceremoniously doused with olive oil.

Next you need to realize how ludicrous it must have been for the earliest followers of Jesus to label him “the Christ.”

That must have made about as much sense as if a cult of fanatics today would try to convince us that Gary Gilmore is alive and kicking, that the man executed by firing squad in Utah back in 1977 is running the country right now as its “president.”

The whole idea borders on the obscene. And it must have been just about as appalling when the first followers of Jesus insisted on calling him “Christ.”

There are some titles which are just about too venerable to mess around with. For centuries

the people of Judah had been ruled by a properly anointed king descended from King David.

When their nation was all but destroyed and their leading citizens transported to Mesopotamia, they kept their hopes up by anticipating a return to the homeland. They dared to hope that they would once again be ruled by another “messiah” or “anointed king” who could claim David as his ancestor.

It didn’t work out that way, however. Even when the Jewish community had been reestablished near Jerusalem and another temple built, the people continued to be ruled by foreign powers.

As the years wore on, their messianic hopes followed several tracks. Some, of course, expected another political chief to rally the troops, drive off the enemy, and establish his headquarters in Jerusalem.

Others of a more spiritual bent anticipated that the age of the Messiah would be marked chiefly by the God-fearing, law-abiding behavior of his subjects.

Still others hoped that the Messiah would be a divine figure of sorts who would swoop out of the haven to establish the Kingdom of God in a series of short, cataclysmic strokes.

About the last thing anyone considered was a small-town rabbi executed for crimes against the state. Yet that’s what his supporters claimed.

Of all the titles they could have chosen for their hero, the one that stuck like a second name was “Christ.”

For they were convinced that all the ancient hopes of their people had been filled up in Jesus. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was the Christ.

Now whether you buy that or not is beside the point. “Jesus Christ” is a religious claim, and if you don’t buy into that religion there’s no sense in mouthing its confession.

On the other hand, you have to admire the nerve of the men and women who insisted on centering their lives to the personality of a crucified teacher-healer. It must have taken a lot of chutzpa to found a religion on someone called Jesus Christ.